

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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by Steve O'Connell

I AM a citizen and a taxpayer," I said stiffly. "When you are through with this destructive invasion of my property, I demand that everything be restored to its exact and original condition."

"Now don't you worry about that, Mr. Warren," Detective-Sergeant Littler said. "The city will put everything in apple-pie order again." He smiled. "Whether we find anything or not."

He was, of course, referring to the body of my wife.

So far they hadn't found it.

"You're going to have quite a job of repair, Sergeant. Your men have practically excavated the garden. The front lawn resembles a plowed field. You are apparently

Remains To Be Seen

What, I ask you, is more heartening than the sight of stalwart American men hard at work with pick and shovel, perspiring with honest toil, searching, searching, ever searching for the body of some murderer's dear wife?

REMAINS TO BE SEEN

dismantling my house, piece by piece, and now I see that your men are carrying a jackhammer into the basement."

We were in the kitchen and Littler sipped coffee.

He still bathed in confidence. "The total area of the United States is 3,026,789 square miles, including water."

Littler had undoubtedly memorized the figure for just such occasions.

"Does that include the Hawaiian Islands and Alaska?" I asked acidly.

He was not ruffled. "I think we can exclude them. As I said, the total area of the United States is 3,026,789 square miles. This encompasses mountains and plains, cities and farm land, desert and water. And yet when a man kills his wife, he invariably buries her within the confines of his own property."

Certainly the safest place, I thought. If one buried one's wife in the woods, invariably some trespassing boy scout digging for arrowheads would uncover her.

Littler smiled again. "Just how big is your lot?"

"Sixty by one hundred and fifty feet. Do you realize that I worked for years to produce the loam in my garden? Your men have burrowed into the sub-soil and now I

see yellow streaks of clay all about."

He had been here two hours and he was still certain of success. "I'm afraid that you'll have more than the tilth of your garden to worry about, Mr. Warren."

The kitchen window gave me a view of the backyard. Eight or ten city laborers, supervised by the police, were turning the area into a series of trenches.

Littler watched them. "We are very thorough. We will analyze the soot of your chimney; we will sift the ashes from your furnace."

"I have oil heating." I poured more coffee. "I did not kill my wife. I do not, in fact, know where she is."

Littler helped himself to sugar. "How do you account for her absence?"

"I do not account for her absence. Emily simply packed a suitcase during the night and left me. You did notice that some of her clothing is missing?"

"How do I know what she had?" Littler glanced at the photograph of my wife I had provided him. "Meaning no offense, why did you marry her?"

"For love, of course."

But that was patently ridiculous and even the sergeant didn't believe it.

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thousand dollars, wasn't she? And you are the beneficiary?"

"Yes." The insurance had certainly been a factor for her demise, but it had not been my primary motive. I got rid of Emily for the honest reason that I couldn't stand her any more.

I will not say that when I married Emily, I was in the throes of flaming passion. My constitution is not shaped in that manner. I believe I entered into matrimony principally because I succumbed to the common herd-feeling of guilt at prolonged bachelorhood.

Emily and I had both been employed by the Marshall Paper Products Company—I as a senior accountant and Emily as a plodding typist without any prospect of matrimony in her future.

She was plain, quiet, subdued. She did not know how to dress properly, her conversation never soared beyond observations on the weather, and she exercised her intellect by reading the newspaper on alternate days.

In short, she was the ideal wife for a man who feels that marriage should be an arrangement, not a romance.

But it is utterly amazing how once the security of marriage is established, a plain, quiet, subdued woman can turn into a determined shrew.

The woman should at least have been grateful.

"How did you and your wife get along?"

Miserably. But I said, "We had our differences, but then doesn't everyone?"

The sergeant, however, was equipped with superior information. "According to your neighbors, you and your wife quarreled almost incessantly."

By neighbors, he was undoubtedly referring to Fred and Wilma Treeber. Since I have a corner lot, theirs is the only house directly next door. I doubt if Emily's voice carried over the garden and the alley to the Morrisons. Still, it was possible. As she gained weight, she gained volume.

"The Treebers could hear you and your wife arguing nearly every evening."

"Only when they stopped their own infernal shrieking to listen. And it is not true that they heard *both* of us. I never raise my voice."

"The last time your wife was seen alive was Friday evening at six-thirty as she entered this house."

Yes, she had returned from the supermarket with frozen dinners and ice cream. They were almost her sole contribution to the art of cooking. I made my own breakfasts, I ate lunch at the company

cafeteria, and in the evenings I either made my own meal or ate something that required forty minutes of heating at 350°.

"That was the last time anyone *else* saw her," I said. "But I last saw her in the evening when we retired. And in the morning when I woke, I discovered that she had packed up and gone."

Downstairs, the jackhammer began breaking up the concrete floor. It made so much noise that I was forced to close the door to the rear entry leading to the basement. "Just who was it who saw Emily last? Besides myself, I mean."

"Mr. and Mrs. Fred Treeber."

There was a certain resemblance between Wilma Treeber and Emily. They had both become large women, Amazon in temper and dwarf in mind. Fred Treeber is a small man, watery-eyed by nature or by the abrasions of marriage. But he plays a credible game of chess and he rather admires me for possessing the inherent firmness that he lacks.

"At midnight that same evening," Sergeant Littler said, "Fred Treeber heard an unearthly scream coming from this house."

"Unearthly?"

"His exact word."

"Fred Treeber is a liar," I said flatly. "I suppose his wife heard it, too?"

"No. She's a heavy sleeper. But it woke him."

"Did this so-called unearthly scream wake up the Morrisons?"

"No. They were asleep, too, and they are also a considerable distance from this house. The Treeber place is only fifteen feet away." Littler filled his pipe. "Fred Treeber debated waking his wife, but decided against it. It seems she has a temper. But still he couldn't go back to sleep. And then at two in the morning, he heard a noise coming from your yard. He went to the window and there, in the moonlight, he saw you digging in your garden. He finally got up the nerve to wake his wife. They both watched you."

"The wretched spies. So that was how you knew?"

"Yes. Why did you use such a large box?"

"It was the only one I could find. But it was still not anywhere near the dimensions of a coffin."

"Mrs. Treeber thought about that all day Saturday. And when you informed her that your wife had 'taken a trip and wouldn't be back for some time,' she finally decided that you had . . . ah . . . organized your wife's body into a more compact package and buried her."

I poured more coffee for myself. Well, and what did you find?"

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He was still faintly embarrassed about that. "A dead cat."

I nodded. "And so I am guilty of burying a cat."

He smiled. "You were very evasive, Mr. Warren. First you denied that you had buried anything."

"I felt that it was none of your business."

"And when we found the cat, you claimed that it had died of natural causes."

"So it appeared to me at the time."

"The cat was your wife's and someone had crushed its skull. That was obvious."

"I am not in the habit of examining dead cats."

He puffed at his pipe. "It's my theory that after you killed your wife, you also killed the cat. Perhaps because its presence reminded you of your wife. Or perhaps because the cat had seen you dispose of your wife's body and just might lead us . . ."

"Oh, come now, Sergeant," I said.

He colored. "Well, animals *have* been known to dig at places where their masters or mistresses have been buried. Dogs, usually, I'll admit. But why not cats?"

I actually gave that some thought. Why not cats?

Littler listened to the jackham-

mer for a moment. "When we get a report that someone is missing, our routine procedure is to send out flyers through the Missing Persons' Bureau. And then we wait. Almost invariably after a week or two the missing person returns home. Usually, after his money runs out."

"And then why in heaven's name didn't you do that in this case? I'm sure that Emily will come back home within a few days. As far as I know she took only about a hundred dollars and I know that she is mortally frightened of self-support."

His teeth showed faintly. "When we have a missing wife, a person who hears a scream, and *two* witnesses to a mysterious moonlight burial in a garden, we recognize all the symptoms of a crime. We cannot afford to wait."

And neither could I. After all, Emily's body would not keep forever. That was why I had killed the cat and managed to be seen burying the box. But I spoke acidly. "And so you immediately grab your shovels and ruin a man's property? I warn you that I will sue if every stick, stone, brick, and scrap of humus isn't replaced exactly as it was."

Littler was unperturbed. "And then there was the blood stain on your living room rug."

"My own blood, I assure you. I accidentally broke a glass and gashed my hand." I showed him the healing cut again.

He was not impressed. "A cover-up to account for the stain," he said. "Self-inflicted."

He was right, of course. But I wanted the spot on the rug in the event that the other circumstances were not enough to drive the police to their search.

I saw Fred Treeber leaning on the boundary fence watching Littler's men at their devastation.

I got to my feet. "I'm going to talk to that creature."

Littler followed me outside.

I made my way between mounds of earth to the fence. "Do you call this being a good neighbor?"

Fred Treeber swallowed. "Now, Albert, I didn't mean any harm. I don't think you really did it, but you know Wilma and her imagination."

I glared at him. "There will be no more chess games between us in the future." I turned to Littler. "What makes you so absolutely positive that I disposed of my wife here?"

Littler took the pipe out of his mouth. "Your car. You took it to the Eagle Filling Station on Murray Street Friday afternoon at five-thirty. You had the car lubricated

and the oil changed. The attendant placed the usual sticker inside the doorframe of your car, indicating when the work was done and the mileage on your speedometer at the time it was done. Since that time, the only additional mileage registered by your car has been eight-tenths of a mile. And that is the exact distance from the filling station to your garage."

He smiled. "In other words, you brought your car directly home. You do not work on Saturdays and today is Sunday. Your car hasn't moved since Friday."

I had been counting on the police to notice that sticker. If they hadn't, I would have had to call it to their attention in some manner. I smiled thinly. "Have you ever thought of the possibility that I might have carried her to an empty lot near here and buried her?"

Littler chuckled indulgently. "The nearest empty lot is more than four blocks away. It hardly seems conceivable that you would carry her body through the streets, even at night, for that distance."

Treeber took his eyes from the group of men at my flower patch. "Albert, as long as your dahlias are being dug up anyway, would you care to trade a few of your Gordon Pinks for some of my Amber Goliaths?"

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I turned on my heel and stalked back to the house.

The afternoon wore on, and gradually, as he received reports from his men, the assurance drained from Littler's face.

The daylight faded and at six-thirty the jackhammer in the basement stopped.

A Sergeant Chilton came into the kitchen. He looked tired, hungry, and frustrated, and his trousers were streaked with clay. "Nothing down there. Absolutely nothing at all."

Littler clamped his teeth on his pipe stem. "You're positive? You've searched everywhere?"

"I'll stake my life on it," Chilton said. "If there's a body anywhere here we would have found it. The men outside are through, too."

Littler glared at me. "I *know* you killed your wife. I *feel* it."

There is something pitiful about a normally intelligent man retreating to instinct. However, in this case, he was right.

"I believe I'll make myself liver and onions tonight," I said cheerfully. "I haven't had that for ages."

A patrolman came into the kitchen from the backyard. "Sergeant, I was just talking to this Treeber character next door."

"Well?" Littler demanded impatiently.

"He says that Mr. Warren here has a summer cottage at a lake in Byron county."

I almost dropped the package of liver I was removing from the refrigerator. That idiot Treeber and his babbling!

Littler's eyes widened. His humor changed instantly and he chuckled. "That's it! They *always*, *always* bury them on their own property."

Perhaps my face was white. "Don't you dare touch one foot of that land. I put two thousand dollars worth of improvement on that property since I bought it and I will not have the place blitzed by your vandals."

Littler laughed. "Chilton, get some floodlights and have the men pack up." He turned to me. "And now just where is this little retreat of yours?"

"I absolutely refuse to tell you. You know I couldn't have gone there anyway. You forget that the speedometer reading of my car shows that it hasn't left the garage since Friday afternoon."

He hurdled that obstacle. "You could have set the speedometer back. Now where is that cottage located?"

I folded my arms. "I refuse to tell you."

Littler smiled. "There's no use stalling for time. Or do you plan to

sneak out there yourself tonight, disinter her, and bury her someplace else?"

"I have no intentions of the kind. But I stand on my constitutional rights to say nothing."

Littler used my phone to route out officials in Byron county and within forty-five minutes, he had the exact location of my cottage.

"Now see here," I snapped as he put down the phone for the last time. "You can't make the same mess out of that place as you have of this one. I'm going to call the mayor right now and see that you're fired."

Littler was in a good humor and practically rubbing his hands. "Chilton, see that a crew gets here tomorrow and puts everything back in place."

I followed Littler to the door. "Every flower, every blade of grass, or I'll see my lawyer."

I did not enjoy my liver and onions that night.

At eleven-thirty, there was a soft knock at my rear door and I opened it.

Fred Treeber looked contrite. "I'm sorry."

"What in heaven's name made you mention the cottage?"

"I was just making conversation and it slipped out."

I had difficulty controlling my rage. "They'll devastate the place.

And just after I finally succeeded in producing a good lawn."

I could have gone on for more furious minutes, but I pulled myself together. "Is your wife asleep?"

Fred nodded. "She won't wake up until morning. She never does."

I got my hat and coat and we went next door to Fred's basement.

Emily's body was lying in a cool place under some canvas. I thought it had been a rather good temporary hiding place. Wilma never goes down there except on washdays.

Fred and I carried Emily back to my house and into the basement. The place looked like a battlefield.

We dropped Emily into one of the deepest pits and shoveled about a foot and a half of clay and dirt over her. That was sufficient for our purposes.

Fred looked a bit worried. "Are you sure they won't find her?"

"Of course not. The best place to hide anything is where somebody has already looked. Tomorrow the crew will be back here. The holes will be filled up and the floor refinished."

We went upstairs into the kitchen.

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year?" Fred asked me plaintively.

"Certainly. We can't flirt with suspicion. After twelve months or so, you may murder your wife and I will keep her in *my* basement until the search of your premises is over."

Fred sighed. "It's a long time to wait with Wilma. But we flipped the coin, fair and square, and you won." He cleared his throat. "You didn't really mean that, did you, Albert?"

"Mean what?"

"That you'd never play chess with me again?"

When I thought about what the police were at this very moment undoubtedly doing to my cottage and its grounds, I was tempted to tell him I had meant it.

But he did look pathetic and contrite, and so I sighed and said, "I suppose not."

Fred brightened. "I'll go get the board."



Every Tuesday

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